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SUBJECT: BELGIAN MUSLIMS REACT TO POTUS SPEECH

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¶1. (U) This cable is a correction for deleted BRUSSELS 846.
Population figures for Muslims in para 2 have been revised
upwards.

¶2. (SBU) Summary: At a June 10 luncheon for Muslim community
leaders, activists, and academics, Charge elicited the
reaction to President Obama's June 4 speech. Belgium has one
of the highest concentrations of Muslims in Western Europe,
with estimates of the Muslim population ranging from 400,000
to 500,000. The speech was well received and widely viewed
and read. Three of the seven topics addressed in the speech
sparked in depth discussion: the Middle East Conflict,
women's issues, and economic development. The guests urged
the U.S. to balance its support for Israelis and Palestinians
and to take pains to avoid vetoes on Middle East resolutions
in the UN. On women's issues, the guests suggested that
education and women's empowerment were more important than
dwelling on the headscarf. Economic development was seen as
an important goal. End Summary.

INTRODUCTION

¶3. (SBU) Charge hosted on June 10 a luncheon for ten
influential Muslim contacts to gauge their reactions to
President Obama's June 4 speech to the Muslim world. Pol-Econ
Counselor, a Poloff, Polintern, and PAO and Cultural Affairs
Assistant attended. The lively discussion revealed that
President Obama's speech was well-received and a topic of
extensive conversation in the Belgian Muslim community. The
guests included: members of NGOs, the leader of a Brussels
organization for minority youth, radio and print journalists,
business and banking professionals, a university professor,
an analyst from the Belgian Threat Analysis Center, a
prominent lawyer, an Antwerp City Councilman, a female
Senator, and the chairwoman of the Belgian Association of
Muslim Professionals. The guests came from all three regions
of Belgium (Flanders, Wallonia, Brussels) and represented
both linguistic communities. They had all watched, read, and
analyzed the speech and freely offered their opinions.

GENERAL REACTIONS

¶4. (SBU) Overall, the speech was very well received by the

guests, who said it was widely-viewed and read throughout the Belgian Muslim community. One guest even remarked that President Obama's speech was the first political issue ever discussed at his extended family's weekly meal. Several guests commented that they were waiting to see what concrete steps the U.S. would take next to address the points the President raised. One offered a speech writer's critique, praising it as a classically crafted speech, dazzling in its delivery and historic in its timing, which touched people directly. Another cited POTUS' example and the American experience of Muslim integration as one for European leaders and countries to follow in terms of breaking down barriers between Muslims and non-Muslims in Europe. Those present expressed a strong desire to be accepted as citizens, and not viewed as immigrants or outsiders.

15. (SBU) The guests also expressed some general concerns with the President's message. One noted the speech was being delivered in what he termed a dictatorship, Egypt; many Muslims he said, believe the U.S. was often overly sympathetic to undemocratic Muslim countries. Another urged the U.S. to take into account the diversity of the Muslim world if it wants to open a new era of relations. Another commented that the idea of a partnership between Islam and the U.S.; i.e., "a partnership between a state and a religion -- seemed irrational." Many think the U.S. always sees a religious angle to everything in the Middle East.

ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

16. (SBU) President Obama's comments on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict engendered the most discussion. The guests made clear that U.S. vetoes in the UN in favor of Israel sent the wrong message to the Muslim world. Charge cautioned the U.S. would continue to oppose one-sided

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resolutions that tend to blame Israel exclusively for problems in the Middle East. Several guests replied that regardless of the wording or justification, the U.S. is perceived as one-sided and overly protective of Israel, unwilling to hold Israel accountable, and oblivious to Palestinian suffering. They urged the U.S. to work diplomatically to ensure balanced resolutions and avoid use of its veto, which reverberates negatively throughout the Muslim world. They also noted that it appeared that Palestinian lives were not "worth as much" to Americans as Israeli or Western lives. The strongest statement was that civil disobedience may change domestic policies, but rarely works to end an occupation; fighting has been necessary for people to achieve independence from "foreign occupation."

WOMEN'S ISSUES AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

17. (SBU) The President's reference to the use of headscarves sparked a lively discussion. A few expressed surprise that the scarf was chosen as an example. They believed it was not a good choice as an illustration of U.S. commitment to women's rights. Our guests said that the headscarf is an issue primarily outside majority Muslim countries and that it would have been preferable to recognize the ways women are oppressed in some Muslim countries, such as the inability to drive a car in Saudi Arabia. One remarked that men focus more on the headscarf than on the women themselves, and access to education was a more important issue for women's development, emancipation, and equality. Finally, they concluded the headscarf issue had taken on symbolic significance rather than a substantive one. They also pointed to the economic underpinnings of any successful strategy in the Muslim world for, as one of them pointed out, the reasons Muslims are here in Belgium (and in Europe in general), are the economic and democratic failures in their countries of origin. They believed that economic development and free trade agreements are crucial for the region, though

one guest cautioned trade agreements often exact a hefty price in the short run on weaker Mediterranean economies.

COMMENT

18. (SBU) The willingness of our guests to join in a free-form and lively discussion showed that President Obama's Cairo speech had reached the Muslim community in Belgium. They unanimously agreed that the speech was a topic of conversation throughout all socio-economic levels of their communities. The focus on the Israeli-Palestinian issue during the lunch showed that the conflict was the major hurdle, which the guests hoped the U.S. would address in a new way, though they knew there would be many challenges. The guests were happy the President had made this effort, but hoped that real action on the Middle East would follow from the President's words.

BUSH

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